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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet discusses the importance of providing state legislators with accurate information and gives guidelines for state education agencies to use when communicating with legislators about special education. The guidelines include: (1) focus on solutions; (2) be accurate; (3) include timelines for specific actions; (4) provide examples of specific situations, research-based practices, or policy solutions; (5) give additional sources; (6) provide concise, accurate information on a focused topic; (7) include minimal text; (8) use bulleted statements of one or two sentences; (9) prepare for faxing; (10) update online information; (11) respond to legislators within 24 hours; (12) avoid big mailings; (13) continue to educate because the composition of state legislatures changes frequently; and (14) target dissemination of materials to organizations that provide support to policymakers. (CR)

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Facts that Make an Impact

Quick Turn Around Project Forum

Guidelines for providing education information to legislators

CONTENT

- FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS. Legislators generally want policy options rather than details of a problem.
- BE ACCURATE. It is important to make sure all facts are correct when distributing information. Often, there is no second chance to inform policy decisions.
- INCLUDE TIMELINES. If the SEA requires a specific action from the legislature, any relevant timelines should be stated clearly.
- PROVIDE EXAMPLES. A few examples of specific situations, research-based practices, or policy solutions are helpful.
- GIVE ADDITIONAL SOURCES. Always include sources for additional information on the topic (e.g., website links and publications), and a contact person who can answer follow-up questions.

FORMAT

- BE BRIEF. Legislators want concise, accurate information on a focused topic. Make available a catalogue of one-page briefs on various issues.
- INCLUDE MINIMAL TEXT. Information should be presented in a visually appealing format interspersed with plenty of white space to allow for quick reading.
- USE BULLETS. Formulate the most pertinent points into bulleted statements of one or two sentences.
- PREPARE FOR FAXING. Don't rely on color to organize or emphasize important points. Faxing allows for quick responses to inquiries.
- UPDATE ONLINE INFORMATION. Legislators are becoming increasingly reliant on web-based postings for direct and immediate access to information. The information must be current and searchable by topic.

PROCESS

- RESPOND WITHIN 24 HOURS. Legislators often require information to make time-sensitive decisions. It is critical that they receive an immediate response to inquiries.
- AVOID BIG MAILINGS. Mass mailings are not considered useful. Legislators are interested in information on a topic only as needed.
- CONTINUE TO EDUCATE. Due to legislative term limits, the composition of state legislatures changes frequently. Legislators need ongoing education on important topics.
- TARGET DISSEMINATION. Organizations that provide support to policymakers gather and index critical materials to inform legislators. Legislators turn to these groups when they need information. It is important to send up-to-date resources and materials to these organizations in a useful format.

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November 2001

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IDEAs that Work
U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

Facts that Make an Impact

Quick Turn Around Forum

Guidelines for providing education information to legislators

Background and Purpose

In the midst of competing educational priorities, it is important for state education agencies (SEA) to know their legislators' position on key issues. Sometimes, important educational issues are not in the legislative pipeline. SEAs can be instrumental in informing and shaping policy to improve educational services for students and their families. In many cases, it may be necessary to explicitly inform policymakers about how special education fits into broader education issues or evolving trends in education reform. Once the SEA staff knows what issues are on the legislative agenda, educational issues may be framed in the context of that agenda.

Legislators need accurate information on a wide range of topics in a timely manner. They cannot be expected to have detailed knowledge on the many complex issues they face each day. Therefore, legislators often rely on specialized organizations to provide important background knowledge when making legislative decisions. These organizations provide information on a number of topics, including education. Some examples of organizations that serve legislators are Education Commission of the States, National Governors' Association, and National Conference of State Legislatures.

Although legislators tend to seek special education information only as needed, the organizations that support them are likely to explore issues that they consider important or anticipate as potential areas of interest to legislators in the future. They also gather brief reports and keep them on file for reference. Therefore, in addition to presenting key education initiatives directly to legislators, SEA staff may want to tailor critical reports to meet the dissemination needs of the organizations that support them, leading to more timely distribution of information.

While the depth of information on special education and related topics differs for each legislative organization, most follow the same presentation format. One way for the SEA staff to learn what legislators are likely to know or come across when gathering information on a particular topic, is to check available online information and publications (e.g., www.nga.org, www.ecs.org, www.ncsl.org). If special education issues are not covered by organizations such as those listed above, the SEA staff may want to bring areas of specific concern to the forefront or to showcase promising state practices.

Finally, by building partnerships with legislators and their education staff, as well as key organizational contacts, the SEA staff is more likely to be included in state-level legislative meetings and hearings, invited to participate on committees, and receive updates on proposed or enacted legislation. Both legislators and SEA representatives are more likely to be responsive to the needs of their constituents, as well as other policymakers, through careful planning and targeted communication.

While it may take time to pare down long, jargon-filled reports and direct the information to the right person, ultimately better rapport and communication has the potential to streamline policy and lead to improved service delivery for all children, including students with disabilities, and their families.

Guidelines for SEAs to use when communicating with legislators and the organizations that serve them can be found on the reverse side.

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